

DID I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR? IMPROVING COMMUNICATION IN YOUR OFFICE

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May 2005**

Professional associations such as the Association of Legal Administrators (ALA), although well recognized as valuable tools of American business, are subject to severe scrutiny by both federal and state governments.

What is quality communication? It can be defined as delivering information that supports ongoing, positive interaction. Quality communication will create an environment where communication continues. When people communicate, they create either an environment of fear or safety. An environment of safety will create trust and respect between the people communicating. People need to know they can communicate what they think or feel without fear of embarrassment or retaliation. If someone creates an environment of fear with their communication, the communication will be short-lived. Without trust and respect, communication will deteriorate.

There are many obstacles to quality communication. Some of them are:

1. One of the parties is not really listening;
2. One of the parties only cares about being right (their ego gets in the way);
3. One of the parties is under a great deal of stress;
4. One of the parties lacks the experience needed;
5. One of the parties may only hear what they want to hear (selective hearing); and
6. Using email as a method of communicating.

Quality communication will make it clear what the benefits will be if the other person(s) does what you want them to do. When a law firm uses quality communication, there tends to be less turnover among employees, higher morale, and even improved client satisfaction as a result of the higher morale and more experienced employees.

There are many rights and responsibilities regarding quality communication. Your rights include:

1. You have the right to express your needs and wants. You should feel free to ask any questions. You should never feel embarrassed. If you don't express your needs, they will be unheard.
2. You have the right to tell others your perception of how they are behaving toward you. Many times people do not realize how they are communicating. If you let them know in a friendly manner, they may change their communication style. In fact, it is good to have a slight smile on your face when you talk to someone, because that expression on your face will make the other person feel welcome.

Your responsibilities regarding quality communication include:

1. You have the responsibility to be respectful. It is never appropriate to raise your voice or use profanity toward another person. You also need to be careful never to use sarcasm or impatience. Sarcasm is sometimes described as meanness cloaked in humor. The use of sarcasm will create fear. Body language can also be a major indicator of disrespect. Also, for example, taking a phone call while in a meeting is disrespectful. Even when you are in conflict, there is no room for disrespect.
2. You have the responsibility to seek alignment. Always try to identify plans which will help you achieve your goals as well as the goals of your peers.

There is always a hierarchal relationship in quality communication. Whoever has the greater power in the communication has the responsibility for quality communication. It is not always the person who is higher in the organization who has the greater power. For example, if an attorney is asking his secretary to work late, she has the power in the communication. She can either choose to work late and do what her boss needs her to

do, or she can choose not to work late. Therefore, she has the responsibility to make sure that the communication is quality communication.

You also need to be aware of yourself and the person you are communicating with. You need to be self-aware. Are you feeling angry? If so, be aware of your tone, pace, and volume of communication. You need to be aware of the other person (empathy). How well do you understand what the other person is feeling and what the other person needs?

There are four communication rules which maximize productivity. They are:

1. Communicate your "commitment to commitment." The single most important business skill is a clear, deeply-rooted philosophy that promises are made to be kept. It is a lifestyle that becomes your reputation. It creates:
 - a. Trust. When people trust you to fulfill your commitments, they will go to extremes to maintain the alliance. Clients will remain loyal. Your vendors will give you the best deal. Your co-workers will put in extra hours.
 - b. Passion. Creating a reasonable plan and then verbalizing your commitment to execute the plan creates a passion for the plan. When you're passionate, you're productive.

There are two elements to communicating your commitment. The first is communicating your commitment to live up to your commitments. This means returning calls, meeting deadlines, arriving promptly. The second part is letting people know you expect them to live up to their commitments. This means you have to discuss your understanding of the meaning of commitment. Your ability to talk directly and comfortably about the value of commitment will reveal its significance and build the foundation for a productive relationship.

2. Communicate your quality standards. Dissatisfaction with the work product of others is usually due to unclear quality standards. Quality standards must be defined at the beginning of every project. When people are clearer about quality, there are fewer errors. That enhances productivity.
3. Communicate respect. When you communicate that you respect others, you will help them feel safe. They will not need to invest their energy in being defensive. And, when people feel safe, they will be more productive.
4. Communicate the next step. Too often, productivity gets postponed because the ball gets dropped. Every meeting should end with a clear understanding about who is going to do what. Everyone must be clear about deadlines.

Finally, on Lawrence Kohn's website, there is a form called Task Manager. Use this form to define a task, the quality expected, and the deadline for the completion of the task. The website is www.kohncommunications.com. Click on Tools, then Management Tools, then Task Manager to view and print out the form. There are many other helpful hints and forms on the website as well.